

*The Psalms:*  
*Their History, Teachings, and Use*

by  
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**Book II**  
**"The Theology of the Psalms"**

**Chapter VI**  
**"The Doctrine of the Future Life"**

Is it so, that the Personal Religion which finds its undying expression in the Psalter is nourished by the spring of a firm hope of eternal life? that that hope filled and cheered the hearts of God's people from the first age of the church? These are questions to which contradictory answers have been given. Not that the general sentiment of devout readers of the Scriptures has wavered much on the point. On their part it has all along been the prevalent opinion, that the hoary fathers of the church,--the patriarchs, and prophets, and psalmists,--when they came to die, fell asleep in the tranquil expectation of an awakening in glory. The contrary opinion has been pretty much confined to narrow circles of learned men, and may be ranked among the paradoxes of the schools. Still the point is, on many accounts, too important to be passed by. Certainly, if the hope of eternal life be absent from the psalms,--much more, if there be found in them words which exclude or repel that hope,--they are not suited to be the manual of praise for the Christian Church, the church of that Prince of life, who, by his resurrection, has begotten his people to the living expectation of the glory of God.

It is not to be overlooked that there do occur, in certain psalms, words which have the appearance of excluding the hope of eternal life.<sup>1</sup> And it may be freely admitted that, if nothing could be brought forward on the other side, we should be shut up to the darkest conclusions regarding the feelings with which the Old Testament saints looked forward to their dissolution. These psalms, accordingly, are much referred to for the purpose of making out one of two things: either, that the Old Testament saints were utterly ignorant of a future life; or, that their minds were possessed with heathenish notions of it, as a state of darkness and of distance from God. The right interpretation of the texts in question is not without its difficulties. But many considerations can be adduced to shew that we are by no means shut up to conclusions so widely different from those which have found general favour with simple-minded students of the divine Word.

1. It is to be observed that, with one exception, the passages referred to occur in psalms of complaint; and, in fact, are cries of distress lifted up to heaven in seasons of darkness and trouble. A moment's reflection will make it manifest that words spoken in such circumstances are not to be so severely construed as if they occurred in a calm

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1 Psalms 6:5, 30:9, 88:10-12, 89:47, 115:17.

dispassionate confession of a man's faith. Let the Eighty-ninth psalm be taken for example. It was written by Ethan the Ezrahite when he witnessed the sudden collapse of the glory of David's house, and the Lord's seeming breach of covenant with David and with Israel.<sup>2</sup> The overturn was so complete as to forbid the hope that the psalmist or any of his contemporaries should ever again, while they lived, behold the good of Jerusalem as they had seen it in the golden reigns of Solomon and his father. This was a bitter reflection to one who so dearly loved Zion; and, when he poured out his heart before God, he could not refrain from a passionate complaint because of the brevity of human life. God's promise to David (his faith assured him) would yet be fulfilled; but what comfort was there in that to him, who should be dead long before the fulfilment came? "How long, LORD? Wilt thou hide thyself for ever? Shall thy wrath burn like fire: Remember how short my time is: wherefore hast thou made all men in vain? What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?" This undoubtedly sounds like the voice of one who knows no hereafter. The psalmist speaks as if all his hopes were bounded by the grave; as if the overthrow of the united kingdom of Judah and Ephraim had bereft him of all his joy; and as if he knew no future kingdom to compensate him with its hopes.

But it would be doing cruel injustice to take him thus at his word. What we hear is the language of passion, not of sedate conviction. This is well expressed by John Howe in a famous sermon. "The expostulation (he observes) was somewhat passionate, and did proceed upon the sudden view of this disconsolate case, very abstractly considered, and by itself only; and the psalmist did not, in that instant, look beyond it to a better and more comfortable scene of things. An eye bleared with present sorrow sees not so far, nor comprehends so much at one view, as it would at another time, or as it doth presently when the tear is wiped out and its own beams have cleared it up."<sup>3</sup> It would be unwarrantable, therefore, to infer from Ethan's expostulation, that the saints who lived under the early kings were strangers to the hope of everlasting life. I am inclined to go further, and to point to this very complaint as affording a presumption that there was in their hearts an irrepressible sentiment of immortality. The bird that frets and wounds itself on the bars of its cage shews thereby that its proper home is the free air. When inveterate sensuality has succeeded in quenching in a man's heart the hope of a life beyond the grave, the dreary void which succeeds utters itself, not in solemn complaints like Ethan's, but in songs of forced mirth,--dismal Anacreontic songs: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die."<sup>4</sup>

"Tis time to live if I grow old,  
Tis time short pleasures now to take,  
Of little life the best to make,  
And manage wisely the last stake."<sup>5</sup>

2. It deserves notice, moreover, that several of the psalms which seem so void of hope were written under deep impressions of sin and an awful sense of God's displeasure. What we hear in them is the cry of hearts smitten with the fear that they are unforgiven, and that

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2 Compare Book I, chap. v, (p. 79). [Dr. Binney refers to an earlier chapter in this book.--KM]

3 *The Vanity of Man as Mortal*, p. 2.

4 1 Cor. 15:32.

5 Anacreon's *Age*, as translated by Cowley.

God's wrath abides upon them. It is no marvel if, in such a state of mind, the blackest views of death and of the world beyond are seen to predominate. An instance of this occurs in the Sixth psalm, the earliest of the class known by the title of "The Penitential Psalms."<sup>6</sup> It is David's sorrowful prayer for mercy at a time of deep affliction,--affliction inexpressibly aggravated by the thought that he had brought it upon himself by his crimes, so that he could not but see in it the wrath of an offended God.

1. O Jehovah, not in thine anger do thou rebuke me,  
Neither in thy hot displeasure do thou chasten me.
4. Return, O Jehovah, deliver my soul;  
Oh, save me for thy loving-kindness' sake.
5. For in death there is no remembrance of thee;  
In Hades (the unseen world) who shall give thee thanks?

Dr. Delitzsch observes very justly<sup>7</sup> that the Christian need have no difficulty or scruple about appropriating these words, although he knows very well that in the world to come God is both remembered and praised continually; for we may quite legitimately take what the psalmist has written regarding the invisible world generally, and apply it in our minds to the place of torment. We are sure that in the lake of fire there is no more any thankful commemoration of God, no singing of sweet psalms. I would go a step further, and attribute this meaning to the psalmist himself. At the time when he uttered his cry for mercy, David feared that he was unforgiven, that his afflictions were the rod of an angry Judge, not of a living Father. Is it any wonder if, under that apprehension, he takes a very black view of death? To a man who is unforgiven, death is just what the psalm declares it to be,--the final separation of the soul from God, its banishment into a region where his name is no more recorded. This is the explanation of the psalm given by Luther and Calvin, amongst others; and they knew from experience something of the inward conflict which it unfolds.

I will add, that these penitential psalms, dark and full of unbelief as they may at some points appear to be, are not the least precious of the songs we owe to the harp of David. The hopeful exultation with which they usually close admonishes the penitent that, if he will only pour out his complaint at the Throne of Grace, his soul will be disburdened. And surely we may see God's love in the circumstance, that he not only invites us to pour out our hearts before him, but puts into our mouths words in which we may give utterance to our anguish and fear.

3. Yet another consideration is suggested by the fact (it is a very significant one), that in all of the psalms in question, there is an earnest solicitude expressed for the glory of God. If death is deprecated, it is in order that the Lord may not lose the glory, nor his church the service, which a life prolonged might furnish. This is well exemplified in the Hundred and fifteenth, which I the rather cite because, being the sole exception to the rule, that the dark views of death are found in psalms of contrition and deep sorrow; it is the only psalm to which the preceding observations are inapplicable. It is a tranquil hymn of praise:--

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6 Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

7 *Commentar* vol. ii. 422 (*Allgemeiner Bericht*, chap. 10).

17. It is not the dead who praise Jah;  
 Neither any that go down into silence,  
 18. But WE<sup>8</sup> will bless Jah,  
 From this time forth and for evermore.  
 Hallelujah!

The psalm thus closed, was one of the Songs of the Second Temple. What we hear in it is the voice of the Church, rather than of an individual soul. And this may assist us in perceiving its entire harmony with faith in the heavenly glory. It much concerns the honour of God that there be continued, on the earth, a visible Church, in which his name may be recorded from generation to generation. That is a work which cannot be performed by the dead. Since, therefore, the uppermost desire of the Church ought ever to be that God's name may be hallowed, his kingdom advanced, and his will done in the earth; it is her duty to pray for continued subsistence here, in the earth, to witness for God. And it is to be carefully observed, that not only in this passage, but in all the parallel texts in which the psalmists seem to speak doubtfully or disparagingly of the state of the departed, it is in connection with the interest of God's cause on the earth. The thought that is uppermost in their hearts is, that "in death there is no commemoration" of God--no recording of his name for the salvation of men.

This single circumstance might, I think, suffice to put the reader on his guard against a precipitate fastening on them of a meaning which would exclude the hope of eternal life. It goes far to shew that what the Psalmists deprecate, is not death simply considered, but premature death. Their prayer is, "O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days."<sup>9</sup> And I do not hesitate to say, that there are men so placed in stations of eminent usefulness, that it is their duty to make the prayer their own. No one will attribute to the Lord Jesus either darkness or hesitation of mind with respect to the future glory; yet he spoke of his life on the earth as his "day," a day that was soon to be swallowed up in a night wherein there should be no more power to work.<sup>10</sup> We have every one a day's work appointed us by God; and if we have reason to fear that our day's work is not done, we may well join with the psalmists in deprecating the coming on of "the night when no man can work."

I have thought it right to begin our inquiry into the doctrine of the Psalter respecting the Future Life, with a notice of the passages which seem to make most strongly against our affirmation that this part of the divine word glows with the hope of eternal glory. It may be admitted that some of the passages disclose a state of painful darkness, and are hardly of the sort that would command ready entrance into a modern collection of sacred poetry. But they are every way worthy of the place assigned to them by the Spirit. Experience testifies that not seldom the way of God's pilgrims lies through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, as well as over the Delectable Mountains; and if the Psalter lets us hear the lamentable cry of Christian in the Valley, as well as his joyful shout on descrying the walls of the heavenly city,

8 The pronoun is emphatic in the original. The Authorised Version (and Mr. Perowne's) rather fail to bring out the point of the contrast instituted between the dead and the living. It is well brought out in Ewald's, *nicht die todten loben Jah . . . aber wir--wir sesnen Jah*. (So Alexander, and all the recent German translators. Comp. Jerome, in his Version from the Hebrew, *Non mortui laudabunt Dominum . . . Sed nos benedicemus Domino*.)

9 Psalm 102:24.

10 John 9:4.

we ought to accept the fact as a new proof, that it is indeed the authentic utterance of the whole heart of God's children in their entire pilgrimage.

The number of psalms in which there is an expression of Faith and Hope regarding the Future Life is very considerable. They may be grouped in three classes.

I. There are some in which the Psalmists profess their hope by appropriating to themselves the confession of the patriarchs, that they were strangers and sojourners on the earth. The history of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob contains nothing more interesting or affecting than the recital of the circumstances in which they witnessed this good confession. After Abraham and Sarah had dwelt together long, as heirs of the grace of life, it pleased the Lord to take away from the patriarch's side the wife of his youth, the dear partner of his life, and he was fain to solicit from the sons of Heth a sepulchre in which he might bury her dust. He prefaced his request with the words, "I am a stranger and a sojourner with you."<sup>11</sup> The same confession was made by Jacob, many years after, when he stood before the king of Egypt. Being asked how old he was, he replied, "The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years."<sup>12</sup> Thus he too confessed he was a pilgrim as his fathers had been. The confession thus made by those venerable saints was often repeated by their descendants.<sup>13</sup> It means much more than some hasty readers perceive. It is often quoted in a way that shews it is taken to mean no more than that the patriarchs knew and acknowledged that they were mortal men, frail creatures, whose days on earth were a fleeting shadow. But if that had been all, it was a confession that might have come quite as well from the sons of Heth as from Abraham, from Pharaoh as from Jacob. We must seek some worthier interpretation. Jacob's confession was not one that Pharaoh could have made. Pharaoh was not a stranger and sojourner in Egypt. Egypt was his home; the only home he knew or desired. With Jacob it was not so. He had no home in the earth. His home lay in a better country. His eye had never seen it; nevertheless he looked for it, and was content, for its sake, to sojourn as a stranger on the earth. This is the interpretation which the epistle to the Hebrews puts on the patriarchs' confession. "They that say such things, declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for he hath prepared for them a city."<sup>14</sup>

Bearing this interpretation in mind (and it is the only one which a serious consideration of the words will allow) how instructive it is to find the Psalmists witnessing the same confession! David does so in the Thirty-ninth Psalm. It is a psalm, we may note in passing, which, but for this profession of faith, one might have been tempted to reckon among those which are lighted up with no ray of hope regarding the future life. "Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears: for I am a stranger with thee and a sojourner, as all my fathers were." In the literal sense of the words, David was *not* a stranger and sojourner in the land, as the patriarchs had been. Judah was the place of his nativity; and from the roof of his palace at Jerusalem his eye might daily visit the fields about

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11 Gen. 23:4.

12 Gen. 47:9.

13 Exodus 2:22; 1 Chron. 29:15.

14 Hebrews 11:14-16.

Bethlehem where his boyhood had been spent. It is plain, therefore, that in appropriating the patriarchs' confession, he put the same construction upon it as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews has done. Walking in the steps of the faith in which his godly progenitors had lived and died, he set his face towards the better country and declared that his true citizenship was in heaven. One of the later psalmists, also, witnesses the same good confession, and urges it as a plea in enforcement of the prayer, that the Lord would vouchsafe him a deeper insight into his law: "I am a stranger in the earth; hide not thy commandments from me."<sup>15</sup> As if he had said, "This earth is not my home: I find nothing in it worthy to be my soul's portion. Thou art my portion, my dwelling-place, my exceeding great reward. O hide not from me, therefore, the knowledge of thy commandments. How, but by their help, can my soul raise itself to thee? It breaketh for the longing it hath unto them at all times."

II. There are not wanting professions of belief in the future life of a more explicit and obvious kind.

Some of the places where these occur have already come under our notice, especially in connection with what was said in a previous chapter, respecting the doctrine of the Divine Similitude. For it is evident that that doctrine--especially when taken in connection with the relative doctrine of the federal relation of the saints to God,--carries the sure hope of a blessed immortality in its bosom. It implies that men may claim an interest in God of a kind from which the lower creatures are debarred. God has said to the believing soul, "I am thy God:" and the soul may without presumption reply, "Thou art my God." These are plain words; but who can fathom the thoughts they express? When the Sadducees came to Christ thinking to perplex him with their cavilling objections against the doctrine of eternal life, he silenced them, to the admiration of the multitude, by quoting the text in which the Lord proclaimed himself to be the God of the patriarchs. "As touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not heard that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."<sup>16</sup> The Lord would not have described himself to Moses as the God of the patriarchs, if he had done nothing more than cater for their support during the few and evil days of their mortal life. To be ABRAHAM'S GOD is something more than to be Abraham's guide through a few troubled and changeful years.<sup>17</sup>

This argument is stated in the epistle to the Hebrews, with a force that is almost startling: "God is not ashamed to be called their God (the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob); for he hath prepared for them a city."<sup>18</sup> God would have been ashamed to be called their God, if all that remained of them when they departed this life had been the mouldering bones at Machpelah,--if he had not gathered them to their people in a city of habitation. It is incredible that God should have put his grace into men's hearts, and received them into such affectionate intimacy as is implied in his being their God, if he had not prepared for them a city in which they might dwell with him for ever. Who will venture to impugn this way of interpreting the Old Testament? It is Christ's way of interpreting his own Word; the

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15 Psalm 119:19.

16 Matt. 22:31, 32.

17 Comp. Bengel's *Gnomon* on Matt. 22:32.

18 Hebrews 11:16.

way he practised himself, and which the apostles learned of him; and it is infinitely to be preferred to the lean, and blind, and barren way taught in some arrogant schools. If our eyes were but opened, we should behold many such wondrous things, out of places in God's law which, to our dim sight, seem comparatively meagre.

I have not forgotten that it is the doctrine of the Psalter, and not of the Old Testament as a whole, that is the matter in hand. To look back, as we have been doing, is no digression from our proper task. No man can do justice to the Psalms who does not study them in connection with the earlier Scriptures, and especially with the Law of Moses. The Pentateuch was the Bible of the Psalmists. They studied it with inexpressible ardour, and its chimes ring through their songs. The light in which they viewed the texts on which we have just seen Christ and the apostles building the doctrine of eternal life, was the same in which Christ and the apostles have presented them. We see, accordingly, that when their meditations turn upon the privilege of communion with God into which his grace has admitted them, they are insensibly led on to profess a joyful hope with respect to the future world. This is exemplified in almost all the passages that were quoted in illustration of the doctrine of the divine similitude in man. Thus in the Seventy-third Psalm, Asaph, when the sight of prosperous ungodliness leads him to think of the more excellent portion his soul possesses in God, finds pleasure in reflecting that this portion is Eternal.

24. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel,  
And afterwards take me to glory.  
26. My flesh and my heart faileth;  
The strength of my heart and my portion is God for ever.

Thus also David, in the Seventeenth Psalm, when his faith is subjected to a trial of the same sort as Asaph's, finds comfort in the same thought which was so helpful to his friend. Turning away from the "men of the world, whose portion is in this life," he makes this lofty profession of his hope:--

15. As for me, in righteousness I shall behold thy face;  
I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.

The strength of these testimonies to the faith of the psalmists, does not lie within the scope of a merely grammatical interpretation. The expressions made use of do not by themselves absolutely compel us to reject the lower and temporal meaning; which accordingly is advocated by some commentators of great eminence. But, standing where they stand, they naturally raise the mind to the higher meaning; and have done so in the vast majority of sober unbiassed readers ever since they were penned. Those words of David, for instance, in which he describes his enemies as "men of the world, whose portion is in this life,"--do they not by plain implication hold forth the godly as men who are *not* of this world and whose portion is in another life? The words are exactly parallel to those of the apostle in which, contrasting himself with many "whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, who mind earthly things," he declares that "our conversation (that is, *our citizenship, our country*, πολιτευμα) is in heaven."<sup>19</sup> This being the psalmist's meaning, is it for a moment to be supposed that when he goes on, as he does in the words that follow, to profess his faith

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<sup>19</sup> Phil. 3:19, 20.

in God with respect to the future, the jubilant hope he utters is bounded by the grave? Is it to be supposed, that this soul, conscious of the divine image, of present communion with God, and of an interest in his love as its proper portion,--is it to be supposed, I say, that such a man has no better hope to utter than that, ere he finally quits the world, ere he bids farewell to the sun, and the fair face of nature, and the sweet companionships of the earth, ere he passes to a land of darkness, and silence, and deep forgetfulness, where the light of God's face will never shine, he shall be satisfied with some transient gleams of the divine favour? Can this be all that David means in comforting himself with the hope of a bright awakening, when he shall behold the face and be satisfied with the likeness of God?<sup>20</sup>

Another passage belonging to this class has been already cited<sup>21</sup> from the Sixteenth psalm. It is much appealed to by the apostles as bearing witness to the resurrection of Christ. Whatever view may be taken of the principle according to which the psalm is to be interpreted,--whether it is regarded as having a direct and exclusive reference to the Lord Jesus, or as expressing in the first instance, the faith of David, and of the Church,--on either supposition it is evident that the hopes so plainly uttered must have been within the reach of Old Testament believers. What, then, are those hopes?

--My flesh shall dwell confidently.  
For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades (the unseen world),  
Neither wilt thou suffer thy favoured One to see the pit.

Thou wilt make me to know the path of life,  
Fulness of joy in thy presence,  
Pleasures at thy right hand for evermore.

The grave does not terminate either the existence or the felicity of God's people. Beyond it, there is for them a path of life, an entrance into God's presence, where their joy shall be full and their pleasures everlasting. There is, moreover, to be a resurrection of the body, a glorious resurrection, in the hope of which the faithful may well resign their dust to the grave without dismay.

It is certain, therefore, that the Personal Religion set forth in the psalms was pervaded with a steadfast expectation of the glory of God. The holy men who wrote them, although their views of the heavenly state were more obscure than those to which the resurrection of Christ has admitted us, were partakers of a hope that was the same in kind with ours. The hope in God that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, was a hope to which "the twelve tribes instantly serving God day and night" steadfastly looked forward,<sup>22</sup> even as we do; and it filled them with the kind of exhilaration which the early traveller feels, when he sees the sky before him beginning to brighten with the splendours of the coming day.

Among the psalms which assert the hope of eternal life, an eminent place belongs to the FORTY-NINTH. Both in form and substance, it is a didactic poem; and it deals expressly with the subject in question, from beginning to end. For that reason, and also because the

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20 Compare the weighty observations of Hupfeld on Psalm 17:14 (vol. i. p. 450.)

21 Page 211, above. [Dr. Binnie refers to an earlier chapter in this book.--KM]

22 Acts 26:7.

Authorised Version has hardly done justice to some parts, I shall quote it in full.

*To the Chief Musician; a Psalm of the Sons of Korah.*

1. Hear this, all ye peoples;  
Give ear, all ye inhabitants of the world:
2. Both children of the lowly and children of the great,  
Rich and poor together.
3. My mouth shall speak wisdom;  
And the meditation of my heart shall be understanding.
4. I will incline mine ear to a parable;  
I will open upon the harp my dark saying.
  
5. Wherefore should I fear in the days of evil,  
When iniquity compasseth me about my heels?
6. They that trust in their wealth,  
And in the multitude of their riches make their boast.
7. None [of them] can by any means redeem a brother,  
Nor give to God a ransom for him;
8. (For costly is the redemption of their soul,  
And it faileth for ever:)
9. That he should still live for ever,  
And not see corruption.
10. But he shall see it:  
Wise men must die;  
Together shall the fool and the brutish person perish,  
And shall leave to others their wealth.
11. Their inward thought [is that] their houses [shall continue] for ever,  
Their dwelling places to all generations;  
They call their lands after their own names.
12. *But man that is in honour hath no continuance;  
He is become like to the beasts that are destroyed.*
  
13. This their way is their folly,  
Yet after them men approve their sayings. (Selah).
14. Like sheep they are driven to Hades:<sup>23</sup>  
Death shall tend them;<sup>24</sup>  
And the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning;  
And their beauty shall Hades consume,  
That it have no more a dwelling place.
15. BUT GOD WILL REDEEM MY SOUL FROM THE POWER OF HADES;  
FOR HE SHALL TAKE ME. (Selah.)
16. Be not thou afraid when a man becometh rich,  
When the glory of his house is increased:
17. For when he dieth he shall take nothing away,

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23 "Sheol" i.e. the invisible world.

24 Or, "Shalal be their shepherd." Comp. Jerome's Version, *Mors pascet eos*.

- His glory shall not descend after him.
18. Though, while he liveth, he blesseth his soul;  
 (And men will praise thee when thou doest good to thyself,)
19. He shall go the generation of his fathers;  
 Never more shall they see light.
20. *Man that is in honour, and hath no understanding,  
 Is become like to the beasts that are destroyed.*

The psalms which are introduced with a formal preface are very few in number; and they are all psalms of principal note, in their several kinds.<sup>25</sup> The circumstance that the one before us is thus introduced, may be taken as an intimation that it is of great weight, and claims more than ordinary attention. And this is confirmed by the farther circumstance, that the introduction, instead of being addressed (like that of the Seventy-eighth) to the Hebrew Church, as the audience for whose instruction it was primarily intended, is expressly and emphatically addressed to the Church Catholic, to "all peoples," even "all the inhabitants of the world." It is plain that, in this instance, the Holy Spirit had very specially in view, the ages during which the psalm, instead of being "recited, in one nation, in the synagogue of the Jews, should be recited in all churches, throughout the whole world."<sup>26</sup> And such being the case, it is certainly a mistake to think that the psalm expresses a type of doctrinal sentiment and religious feeling proper only to the darkness of the preparatory dispensation and now rendered obsolete by the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Although indited by a Hebrew pen, it is a Christian psalm and was from the first inscribed to the Christian church. The particular exercise of faith which it holds forth will never become obsolete, while the world lasts.

The theme is the same as we have seen elucidated in the Seventeenth and Seventy-third psalms--the mystery of God's providence towards the righteous and the wicked; and the aim of the psalmist is the same, namely, to encourage God's people to take "for an helmet the Hope of Salvation," when they are shaken in mind at the sight of prosperous ungodliness. The grand lesson intended to be inculcated is worked out in each of the two stanzas of which the body of the psalm consists. In the first it is worked out partially, in the second more perfectly. The Psalmist has been himself perplexed by the problem to which he summons the attention of the world. Like Asaph in the Seventy-third psalm, he has been shaken in mind by seeing vile men rich, powerful, prosperous. Reflecting on that sight, the first consideration impressed on his mind is the vanity of riches. These men trust in their wealth. They boast themselves as if they were a kind of gods on the earth. Yet after all, how helpless are they! When death knocks at their door and they would fain have him depart, will their wealth bribe him away? When a brother is laid down with sickness, will their wealth avail for a ransom-price? Can they buy him off, so that he shall still live and not see corruption? No, no. Death prevails over all; wise men and brutish fools,--all die; and their wealth passes into other hands. The redemption of a man's life is too precious to be accomplished with silver and gold. The attempt is vain. It must be let alone and cease for ever! Thus the Psalmist is conducted to the sentence with which the first stanza is wound up, "*Man that is in honour hath no continuance; he is become like to the beasts that are*

25 See Psalms 45:1 and 78:1-8, and compare the remarks on the former in chap. i., and on the latter in chap. x of this Book.

26 Augustine, *Enarratio* i. in Psalm 48. (49.)

*destroyed.*" The reflection is a salutary one: fitted to arm the rich against pride and the poor against envy. Death comes to the palaces of the rich as surely as to the cottages of the poor, and all the wealth in the world cannot persuade him to pass by. It is, I repeat, a salutary reflection; but, after all, it is not a bright or consolatory one. There is no glory of heavenly hope upon it. Heathen moralists were as familiar with it as the psalmist. It is useful, so far as it goes; but it does not go far towards enabling the heart to acquiesce cheerfully in the allotments of God's providence. It may enable a man to look with stoical contempt on worldly grandeur: but stoical contempt is a heathenish virtue, and stops far short of the soul-tranquilising thought that God doeth all things well.

The verses that follow lift us up beyond these clouds into a serener air. The sentence into which the argument of the first stanza was gathered up is set down a second time at the close of the psalm. But this time with an important variation. Here it is the man "*that hath no understanding,*" who is compared to the beasts that are destroyed. We are thus reminded that there are some who, by God's grace, have understanding: men who "fear the Lord, which is wisdom; and depart from evil, which is understanding." Their case is not to be confounded with that of the ungodly. Death does not separate them from their soul's portion, does not extinguish their felicity. They do not perish like beasts, but are taken up into God's presence to dwell there like angels. What is thus taught by implication, in the refrain, is set forth explicitly in the body of the stanza. Two declarations claim special attention. After describing the death of the ungodly as their being "driven by the stern shepherd, Death, into the unseen world," as sheep are driven unwillingly into a pen, he declares his belief that a day is coming,--a bright Morning,--in which the saints shall have dominion (ver. 14);--an announcement which carries forward the mind to the morning of the resurrection, when "the saints shall judge the world."<sup>27</sup> Then, coming home to his own case, he makes profession of his hope in words of strong assurance: "*God will redeem my soul from the power of the unseen world; for he shall take me.*"

The former part of this profession of the psalmist's faith is best illustrated by the parallel text in Hosea, "I will ransom them from the power of the grave" (*i.e.* "I will redeem them from the power of the unseen world;"--the words in the original are the same as in the psalm); "I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction."<sup>28</sup> The believer has faith in God that, when he dies, he shall not be shut up in darkness, but shall be received into the presence of God, and be raised up in glory at the last day. That victory over death, which the worldling's wealth cannot purchase for his dearest friend, is made sure to every one who puts his trust in God. The words that follows, "for he shall take me," correspond to those of Asaph, "thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards take me to glory"; and, in both places, there is an allusion to the language of the sacred history in relating the translation of Enoch: "he was not, for God took him."<sup>29</sup> Not that Asaph or the writer of the Forty-ninth psalm expected to be translated like Enoch; but the "taking up" of the antediluvian saint suggested to their minds a world of precious truth respecting the future life, and strengthened in their hearts the hope of eternal glory in the presence of God. We have before us, therefore, a clear and strong declaration of hope; for, after all, what more can the believer say even now? The highest attainment our faith can

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27 1 Cor. 6:2.

28 Hos. 13:14.

29 Gen. 5:24.

reach, in the prospect of dissolution, is to lay hold on the promise of Christ and say, "Thou wilt come and receive me to thyself, so that where thou art, there I shall be also"; and what is this but to repeat the profession of hope that is embedded in the Forty-ninth psalm?

Hitherto the testimonies cited have been such as must have been understood by the Old Testament saints in the sense contended for. In order to complete our view of the subject it is right to add, that there are other texts, many in number, which, although it may be impossible to prove that they were penned with a conscious reference to the future life, have been carefully framed by the Spirit to admit and suggest the thought of that life.<sup>30</sup> Thus, when it is said<sup>31</sup> that "the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous," the words may not have carried the mind of the Old Testament reader beyond the thought that the Lord will, by sifting dispensations of his providence, bring to light the worthlessness of the ungodly and separate them from the company of his true people. It is just possible that this may be all that the words signified to Hebrew readers. But they are obviously capable of a much higher reference; and I do not doubt that they were purposely framed by the Spirit to be the vehicle in which we, who live under the New Testament, may give expression to our belief, that a time is coming when the Lord will "sever the wicked from among the just," and "gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity."<sup>32</sup>

The closing verse of the Twenty-third psalm furnishes another example of the same sort. There may be room for difference of opinion as to the thought that was in David's mind when he wrote, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." If any choose to maintain that the hope with which he solaces himself is that of enjoying communion with God through a long serene evening of life, I will not contend with them; but I am sure that it is no arbitrary accommodation of the words when we, in singing them, think of the heavenly temple, and cheer ourselves with the hope of dwelling there for ever. This is a sense the words easily admit; which they inevitably suggest; and of which, I do not doubt, they were framed to be the vehicle. And the number of such passages in the Psalms is very considerable.

The Psalter, then, is certainly misinterpreted by those who represent it as destitute of clear intimations respecting the Future Life. It would have been a strange thing, indeed, if intimations of the kind had been wanting in such a Book. We should have been shut up to the inference that the thoughts of the chosen people were tied down to the earth and this temporal life by tighter bonds than were laid on any of their heathen neighbours.<sup>33</sup> It is well known that the Egyptians, in whose wisdom Moses was educated and whose civilisation was the cradle in which the Hebrew Church was nursed, were a people who speculated much about the world beyond the grave, and that the thought of it penetrated their religious system and their social life. It would have been singular if a church which, in addition to the

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30 Delitzsch has some judicious remarks on this aspect of the subject in the Appendix to his Commentary (vol. ii. 422).

31 Psalm 1:5.

32 Matt. 13:41-49.

33 Max Müller observes, that in the Vedas,--the Sacred Books of the Ancient Hindoos,--"we find what is really the *sine qua non* of all real religion, a belief in immortality, and in personal immortality." And he adds that, "without a belief in personal immortality, religion surely is like an arch resting on one pillar, like a bridge ending in an abyss."--(*Chips from a German Workshop*, p. 45.)

wisdom of the Egyptians, possessed the uncorrupted heritage of primitive revelation and a whole body of Mosaic oracles, had been so chained to the present world that its sacred poetry uttered no bright or joyous hope of future glory. But in truth there is, as we have ascertained, no ground whatever for such a paradoxical conclusion. The Psalter glows everywhere with a brightness which nothing could have imparted except a deep presentiment of eternal life; and in several places that presentiment shapes itself into a strong articulate hope.

Another side of the question claims a short notice before we pass on. Admitting that the hope of the heavenly glory is found in this portion of Scripture, it may be asked, how we are to explain the comparative *paucity* of the instances in which it is expressed. The texts that are perfectly clear and explicit are few in number. It would be difficult to muster so many as half-a-dozen. In the rest of the psalms the hope is present, at the best, in the shape of a diffused brightness. This, and the reason of it, have been well brought out by the late Isaac Taylor. After referring to the fact that there are some psalms which "contain allusions, not obscure, to that better world,--that 'more enduring substance,'--that 'inheritance unfailing,' upon which the pious in all times have kept the eye of faith steadily fixed," he calls special attention to the Hundred and nineteenth, and remarks:--

"But now in all the 176 couplets of this Psalm, there are not more than two or three phrases, and these of ambiguous meaning, which can be understood as having reference to the Future Life, and its blessedness; and so it is in other psalms of this same class. One such expression, susceptible of an extended meaning, there is in the 23d Psalm; none in the 25th, nor in the 30th, where it might naturally be looked for, nor in the 32d, the 42d, the 63d, the 84th, the 103d; and these are the Psalms which might be singled out from the class which they belong to, as samples of the deepest utterings, the most intense yearnings, of individual devotion--the loving communion of the soul with God. Can any explanation be given of this apparent defectiveness, in the instances adduced, which seem to demand the very element that is *not* found in them?

"We are not called to seek for an explication of this difficulty among groundless conjectures concerning what might be the Divine intention, in thus holding back from these devotional odes the element which might seem the most eminently proper to find a place among them: what we have before us is the incontestible fact, that these Psalms--and these by preference--have actually fed the piety of the pious--have sufficed for giving utterance to the deepest and most animated religious emotions, throughout all time, since their first promulgation; and it has been as much so since the time of the Christian announcement of immortality, as before it; we might say, much more so. During all these ages, these many generations of men who have sought and found their happiness in communion with God, there has been in use, *by the Divine appointment, a liturgy of the individual spiritual life*, which, abstinent of all the excitements of immortal hope--unmindful of, almost, as if ignorant of, the bright future, takes its circuit, and finds its occasions, in and among the sad and changeful and transient experiences of the present life. Here is before us a daily ritual of fervent, impassioned devotion, which, far from being of an abstracted or mystical sort, is acutely sensitive towards all things of the passing moment. This metrical service of daily prayer, praise, intercession, trust, hope, contrition, revolves within the circle of the everyday pains, fears, and solaces of the religious man's earthly pilgrimage. Pilgrimage it is, for

the devout man calls himself 'a stranger, a sojourner on earth;' and yet the land whereunto he is tending, does not in any such manner fill a place in his thoughts, as that it shall find a place in the language of his devotions!

"What is the inference that is properly derivable from these facts? Is it not this, that the training or *discipline* of the soul in the spiritual life--the forming and strengthening of those habits of trust, confidence, love, penitence, which are the preparations of the soul for its futurity in a brighter world--demands a concentration of the affection upon the Infinite Excellence--undisturbed by objects of another order? If this be a proper conclusion, then we find in it a correspondent principle in the abstinence, throughout the Christian Scriptures, of descriptive exhibitions of the 'inheritance' that is promised. The eternal life is, indeed, authentically propounded; but the promise is not opened out in any such manner as shall make meditation upon it easy. Pious earnestness presses forward on a path that is well assured; but on this path the imagination is not invited to follow. The same purpose here again presents itself to notice--a purpose of *culture*, not of excitement.

"There can be little risk of error in affirming that the New Testament itself furnishes no liturgy of devotion, for this reason, that a liturgy, divinely originated, had already been granted to the universal Church; and it was such in its subjects, and in its tone, and in its modes of expression, as fully to satisfy its destined purposes. Devout spirits, from age to age of these later times, since 'life and immortality were brought to light,' have known how to blend with the liturgy of David the promises of Christ: these latter distinguished from those long before granted to Patriarchs and Prophets, more by their authoritative style and their explicit brevity, than by any amplifications that might satisfy religious curiosity."<sup>34</sup>

This explanation is as just as it is eloquently propounded; and if so, we must recognise the wise hand of God in the comparative abstinence of the Psalmists from those detailed contemplations of the promised glory which have always abounded in the devotional poetry of uninspired writers. There is a way of dilating on the heavenly felicities which tends to foster the antinomian perversion of the gospel; and which is scarcely less mischievous in its effects than the Romish practice of annexing the hope of heaven, and of a speedy admission into its joys, to services which are obviously compatible with habitual ungodliness of mind. What our hearts need to be taught is, not so much that heaven is a very glorious place, and exceedingly to be desired, as that without holiness no man can enter into it. This is what the Holy Spirit seems to have designed in impressing on the Psalms the feature under consideration. The future glory is never held forth except with accompaniments which compel the reader to associate with it the thought of God and of holiness. We have seen that the delineations of the heavenly state are so framed, that it has been possible to interpret them, not without plausibility, as merely descriptive of the life of faith on the earth. The design, I have no doubt, was--as the effect certainly is--to render it impossible for any to employ the Psalms for nourishing in their minds the hope of the heavenly glory, unless they are willing to use them also for assistance in a course of present communion with God.

"The Doctrine of the Future Life," in William Binnie, *The Psalms: Their History, Teachings, and Use* (T. Nelson and Sons, 1870).

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34 *The Spirit of the Hebrew Poetry*. 1861. Pp. 177-180.